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ABSTRACT

As seen from interviews with graduating seniors in a small liberal arts college for women, humanities majors are generally unrealistic about their training and abilities, often unsure about their career goals, antagonistic toward government and business, and frequently unresponsive to suggestions about nontraditional career options. In addition, because of their optimism, their humility, and their lack of direction, humanities majors have traditionally put off the job search until late in their senior year and often interview for very few postions. Career counseling, improved information distribution, and supportive faculty advising should help these students to formulate realistic objectives. (JM)

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STUDENT ATTITUDES: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES

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As director of Career Counseling at a small liberal arts college for women and as an academic humanist as well, I have become concerned about the expectations and attitudes that humanities majors carry into their first encounters with the market place. I interviewed 104 graduating seniors during the 1974-75 academic year, and saw perhaps double that number of underclassman. I came away from those interviews feeling frustrated and depressed. Students were generally unrealistic about their training and abilities, were often unsure about their career goals, antagonistic toward government and business, and frequently unresponsive to suggestions about non-traditional career options.

Some examples:-- The English major who thought that $10,000 would be an acceptable salary for a starting job.
-- The music major turned would-be journalist who was appalled to learn that she would be expected to write 17 inches of copy a day in an arts reporter position.
-- The 102 students who wanted"to work with people."
-- The junior who rushed back to her dormitory to wash her hair (to prove that she was feminine) when a naval officer training program was suggested.
-- The senior, two weeks away from graduation, who complained bitterly when she was called for a third interview with a prestigious bank.

Attitudes and expectations like these are learned -- learned from

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parents, from faculty, from the media. For the generation of students graduating from liberal arts colleges in the mid'70's, there is still an emphasis leftover from high school days that getting into college is a life goal, that it is, somehow, a conclusive process. Thus, these graduates optimistically feel that they have "concluded" and that somebody-- the college, society, employers-- owes them a job-- and not just any job.

And yet they are not really arrogant. In fact, many are so humble that, as John Chiardi said in a different context, they " use humility as a weapon." They know neither their own strengths nor the strengths of their disciplines. It is here, it seems to me, that humanities faculty have failed. History majors should be trained researchers capable of working with detail, analyzing, recognizing, and synthesizing conflicting truths; English majors should have been taught to write persuasively, logically, and concisely about complex ideas, to think imaginatively, metaphorically and -- hopefully -- coherently: yet these skills, needed and recognized within the business community, taught by humanistic disciplines, are not those that students recognize in themselves. They smile wanly when they mention their major and seem thoroughly inarticulate when asked to define their abilities. As entry level hires of liberal arts graduates continue downward-- they are off more than 50% over a four year period-- and corporate recruiting emphasizes the narrowly trained individual, our students must be trained first to be trainable and then to recognize the skills which they possess.

They are undirected too in their vision of the job they seek. Every placement counselor and recruiter learns to expect the " I want to work with people " sentence early in a counseling interview. Because liberal arts colleges do indeed emphasize humanistic approaches and solutions we should expect this attitude from our students. Yet because students have settled for an easy cliche they have not come to terms with how they want to work with people: to help them, direct them, persuade them, organize them, teach them. Not only do they not recognize their abilities, they do not know themselves. Because many liberal arts students mean "help" when they say "with", we face a related problem: well-meant advice to seek a guidance and counseling degree-- (you don't need teaching certification,you don't need psychology) and thus we let loose upon the next several generations of high school students an over-abundance ill-prepared "counselors".A third concern is that "working with people" has become so accepted a pseudo-goal that students who would really be happier working with ideas, substances, or machines refuse to recognize within themselves their own preferences. It has become socially unacceptable -- at least at Queens-- not to want to work with people.

Because of their optimism, their humility, and their lack of direction, humanities majors have traditionally put off the job search until late in their senior year. They do not know where to begin looking for the job of their hazy dreams, often do not assemble a dossier or form a resumé, and frequently do not bother to interview

the few firms which still recruit liberal arts students. In fact, even in a year in which newspapers have been clogged with gloomy economic news, many liberal arts seniors blissfully ignored the bad tidings. Yet the earlier in the year seniors are forced to face economic realities, the more adaptable they frequently become in their job search, and often the more successful they are in obtaining entry level positions. Of the fifty-eight 1975 Queens graduates who looked for positions in government or business twelve had found jobs on graduation day -- and the only thing these twelve students had in common was that they began looking in February and interviewed extensively. If faculty -- not just placement counselors-- stress the importance of the early continuing search and identification of prospective employers, students may have more success in obtaining desirable positions.

Graduates are unrealistic not only in their approach to the marketplace but in their expectation of the nature and importance of their initial job. In the year following their college graduation, over 15 % of the class of 1974 had either quit their first jobs or were so strongly considering quitting that they came back to Queens' placement office for counseling or services. Invariably the reason was lack of responsibility or dislike of a superior. In job objective statements the invariable formula is " a <u>responsible</u> position " in banking, advertising, advertising, retailing, etc. Yet most liberal arts graduates have had no training, no experience, and little background in the area in which they seek responsibility. At a woman's college

the problem takes on an additional flavor: the refusal -- under any circumstances-- to accept a secretarial position that may lead to other openings, and frequently a denial of typing ability or an avoidance of typing courses because they have been taught -- often by faculty -- to consider such employment demeaning. Yet until young women college graduates are willing to accept the travel and inconveniences of the traditional male route to mid-management jobs-- the sales representatives or technician job-- they must offer some skill or experience at the entry level.

While career counseling, improved information distribution, and supportive faculty advising can help humanities majors formulate realistic job objectives, a more deepseated attitude continues to be a problem. Studies for a number of years have indicated that students are deeply suspicious of government; even more view the business world with hesitation or distrust. The novels they read, the history they learn are fraught with anti-business bias. It's difficult to consider working as a sales representative for Armour-Star after reading The Jungle; local government is a seamy career for young historians who have studied The Shame of the Cities. There is no easy solution to this problem: I am obviously not advocating not teaching works critical of the business or government establishment. Yet if we teach students to judge, not to pre-judge, to accept business and government not as monoliths but as collections of individuals, perhaps we can help them to explore career possibilities that they would otherwise reject.

We are facing in the 1970's a rapidly shifting job market. While we may believe -- and I think rightfully -- that we are educating students for jobs which will be available in the twenty-first century, we also have a responsibility to them in the present. For students to have realistic expectations faculty must have current knowledge of what jobs are available now and what will be available in the future. We must be aware of the availability of advanced training in areas for which a demand will exist; information retrival, occupational therapy, arts administration and planning, museology-- these are new to many of us, and we must inform ourselves of these possibilities. We also need to suggest non-traditional career objectives to humanities majors and to offer them opportunities through internships, corporate visitations, and on-campus career seminars, to learn what people do all day. Often the student's problem is not so much a matter of unrealistic expectation as it is of a total lack of expectation. Liberal arts majors do not know what to expect of the future so they respond to the buzz words of the present: "public relations," "management trainee," or "historic preservation." This lack of information comes because their experience, like ours, is limited; they know what their parents do, what teachers, medical personnel, and public contact people do because they see them. Conditioned by the media, inexperienced or ignorant about economic processes, and idealistic by nature or training, it is little wonder that they seek the known when they begin their job hunt.